



# The Creative Soul of Anne Lamott

{ BY ROB SIDON AND CARRIE GROSSMAN }

**A**nne Lamott is a celebrated writer and God seeker, known for her ruthless honesty and self-effacing humor, who has been inducted into the California Hall of Fame. Born in 1954, she was raised in Marin County by passionate intellectuals who fostered in her lasting progressive views and a quest for social justice. She wrote her first novel, *Hard Laughter*, in 1980 for her father, writer Kenneth Lamott, when he was diagnosed with brain cancer. Steeped in the material realities and disciplines of the artist's path, she taught tennis, cleaned houses, and took sundry writing gigs to make ends meet until 1994, when the success of *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* afforded her the opportunity to become a full-time writer. A dedicated Christian, she has written numerous books on faith, including *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. She is finishing a new book of essays called *Small Victories*, to be published in November. Despite being an old-fashioned contemplative who urges the scritch of graphite on paper as a sacred part of the creative process, Anne has a tremendous social media following. We are proud to have caught up with her two weeks after her 60th birthday, asking her to share some insights into the blazes of her creative soul.

**Common Ground: For those who don't know Anne Lamott, how would you describe yourself?**

**Anne Lamott:** I'm an author. I've written 15 books on mostly everything. I'm a political activist. I'm a mother and a grandmother, a left-wing Christian, a Sunday school teacher.

**One might say of you "she was simply born to create." Is that a fair assessment? When did you realize this was innate, the only way to live your life?**

Honest to God, I think creativity is innate in everybody. My father was a writer, which gave me an advantage. I grew up with a dad who was at his study at 5 o'clock every single morning, rain or shine or flu or hangover, so I learned the muscle of creativity, which was that you just show up. You do it when you don't want to. You do it because it hurts your heart if you don't get your day's work done. I was very shy and strange as a child, which ultimately helped

me a lot. I learned to be funny and got lost in reading chapter books and writing. I got lost and found in chapter books then as I do now, even though instead of Pippi Longstocking, it's Barbara Kingsolver, but it's the same phenomenon of entering fully into someone else's world. I wrote little poems when I was very young.

I remember one of my first assignments, when my dad sent a postcard of a baby Snowy Owl and asked, "What do you think this little fellow's story might be?" We used to have this fabulous paper that was half for drawing and half for writing. I did my own picture of the Snowy Owl and then wrote a story about him, gave him a name. That's where it all began.

**This being our Creativity issue, can you describe your creative process?**

My creative process is to sit down at a desk five days a week, at the same time every day. I don't wait for inspiration or believe in being inspired. I just write when it's time to write. I'm never in the mood to write. I'd rather watch MSNBC or go for a hike, but I'm very strict with myself at the same time I'm very loving, like your best friend would be. I remember something the late, great Dr. Spock advised, which is that with two-year-olds you have to be firm and friendly. So that's how I treat myself, creatively. I try to make it easy on myself by making short assignments, like "all I'm going to do today is write the passage about scattering Mom's ashes." Or "all I'm going to do today is write about taking my uncle to the little pond at Point Reyes." Then there's a whole chapter in *Bird by Bird* called "Shitty First Drafts" about scribbling and spewing really bad, long passages. But then I go through it to make it better because nobody's interested in all the details. But you don't know which are the good ones until you've spewed it all out.

Then I just push forward: left foot, right foot, breathe. At one point I pull up my sleeves, and





*Clockwise from top:* Raised by left-wing intellectuals in the '50s, Lamott was exposed early to the arts; growing up in Marin County during the early hippie movement; father Kenneth was a writer whose brain cancer prompted Anne to write her first novel, *Hard Laughter*, published in 1980



I get stricter. Like Jessica Mitford said, you have to kill your little darlings. So I take out some of the passages that I thought were so brilliant and made me look erudite. I kill the little darlings where I'm just showing off. And then I write another draft, and I probably write another draft.

**The end product flows like honey, but the havoc and discipline to make it goes unseen.**

I believe that any kind of freedom, whether it's creative, spiritual, or political—it all comes through discipline.

**How much is about looking within versus looking without?**

Good question. I'm not a journalist, so I tend to write about the heart and soul of my real life—that is family, my church, the world of nature that I live in, political reality, so I'm always observing the outside world and my reaction to it. I'm always paying attention and listening. I always have a pen and paper with me

whether I'm up on Mount Tamalpais, or in the express line at Whole Foods. Most of writing is about paying attention, whether it's to the outside world or within.

**For creativity, who's the more effective creative taskmaster, pain or joy?**

I don't think either. I think that everything, just like life, is a mixed grill. I don't want to read somebody who's in extreme depression or taking life too seriously nor by the same token do I want to read somebody who's just giddy and comical. I want to read stuff that is profound, and if it has a good sense of humor then boy, it's much more tempting. I love to come upon people telling the truth and cutting through the BS. Offer me your version of things.

**Do you think of spirituality as a process, akin to the creative process?**

It's funny, I give a lot of talks on writing and a lot of talks on faith and can bring the same notes to either. Because it's all what we've been discussing; it's all short assignments. It's going

with the grain and flow of things and not trying to force your own will onto either your thinking mind or your heart mind or your material. Being there to be a trustworthy narrator—somebody who will try to capture the truth to share as medicine for other people. So yes, often I fly somewhere and realize I brought the notes for spirituality when it's really a writing lecture or vice versa, and it really doesn't matter. It's short assignments and shitty first drafts and one day at a time.

Nothing important comes easily. It's much harder than I or anyone was led to believe. So much about spirituality and creativity is unlearning what we were taught as children and the lies we were told about how it should come more easily. To be an artist, to be a spiritual seeker, it takes full absorption, and it also takes making a tremendous number of mistakes and falling on your butt. It takes starting over again and again and letting people help you get up. It takes you learning how to get up by yourself when there's no one else there. It takes learning to receive, which is hard for women who give and save and fix and rescue and use up their life force trying to help others in the family. To be a great artist or a person of satisfying spirituality, you have to be in reception mode and agree to receive what has been so freely given to each of us.

**You're a longtime Christian; does Eastern philosophy influence you?**

I grew up on parents who love jazz and beatniks, where it was okay to be a Buddhist and an Allen Ginsberg, whirling dervish type, so I've been very influenced by Eastern mysticism and Hinduism and meditation, and those are all part of my practice, but I'm definitely a Christian girl. When I was a young person, in my early 20s to my early 30s, I really wanted to be somebody who found a niche for herself in the East because it was much hipper. And my parents both were so contemptuous of Christianity. I tried really hard to find a way to God that was not as embarrassing as to be a Christian, since most people identify Christianity with the far right or the Tea Party. When I was 31 and still drinking, I found my way to this funny little Presbyterian church that I still go to. I never left. I got sober the next year.

**You have an unorthodox and very candid way of talking to God. Can you share how that works?**

Sometimes my prayers are very casual with God, and I talk to him—or her—as if I'm talking to a friend who I just can't see, which is ultimately how I feel about God. Other times it's more formal. I'm at church every Sunday

and spend a lot of time in prayer. To some degree it's circumstantial. When I wake up in the morning, and my grandson and both dogs are on the bed and sound asleep and I'm talking to God, it might be very quiet, and I'm so grateful and wistfully amazed at how beautiful my life is. So I speak to God more seriously in an expression of gratitude and with a willingness to serve.

At other times I feel more informal with God, hoping and banking on the fact that God has a great sense of humor, because otherwise I'm doomed. Sometimes I try to catch God up on things, and I imagine God sometimes rolling his or her eyes at my ridiculous efforts to get everything to come out my way. I imagine God just goes, "Oh, God."

### **You grew up in the conformist era of the '50s and early '60s.**

My parents were very left-wing, so that was extremely helpful. They were really plugged into the cultural left. I grew up in a family of political activists, and my father was a writer. Both my parents were brilliant intellectuals. People with rich creative lives. So I was always exposed to great art and literature and great music. We were such a nonconformist family.

I was 10 in 1964 when the early hippie thing began. The Beatles had come to town, and the whole world had changed. I lived in Marin County. I was in San Francisco a lot, with lots of choices, but I was also a very committed tennis player until I was 16. So I had this structured athletic life yet growing up around hippies and drugs and alcohol and the Beatles and jazz with Quicksilver and Joan Baez and Pete Seeger and the Grateful Dead—very lefty nonconformist setting.

### **Politics is so divisive. The right just hates the left and vice versa. From a humanistic point of view, it feels wrong. How do you reconcile the left-right divide?**

There's nothing for me to reconcile. I am an entirely left-wing person who lives and breathes progressive beliefs. Very influenced by liberation theology. I love the new Pope. I'm not trying to convert people to what I believe. There's going to be a certain number of Christian readers who think I've got it all wrong because I'm completely pro-women's rights, completely anti-death penalty, that I'm a feminist and a tax-and-spend liberal, but it doesn't come up much. If people are opposed to my beliefs, there are other Facebook pages they can visit or other books they can buy that will support what they already believe.

### **Let me put that differently, by an ex-**

### **ample. I was speaking with a friend who was invited to the Oval Office last week to meet the President. He was blown away by the God energy that infuses that office and that role. He came away convinced that God works particularly through our presidents, irrespective of their political orientation. If so, what do you make of "your" God, acting through George Bush or any conservative?**

There was eight years of George Bush, and as a Christian, a person that believes in human rights, a profound commitment to the poor, world peace, freedom of the press, and the Constitution, I was passionately opposed to that administration. I felt that it was not guided by God so much as it was guided by Dick

George Bush was guided and manipulated by Dick Cheney, but I would wash Cheney's feet because Jesus would want me to. At the same time, I see him as a war criminal and believe he's going to have to straighten some stuff out with God before he gets into heaven.

### **You've raised a son and now a grandson. Do you feel they are growing up in a time that is equally supportive, creatively?**

I hate that everybody is on their cell phones so much and that their lives are so much about the Internet and computers. My son happens to be an intensely creative person, a great artist. It's just the modern era—I think in many ways it makes it harder for artists. Now you can write



With her son, Sam, and grandson, Jax

Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. I believe Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney are children of God and as cherished as my grandchild, but at the same time, I rose against them, marching in every peace rally I could and went to jail protesting Iraq. Now that we have a liberal Christian in the White House, people are doing the same thing. I'm passionately opposed to the NRA, and on this side of the grave I'm going to fight tooth and nail against them. Of the NRA you can say that Wayne LaPierre is a Christian believer. Good, he gets to believe what he wants. I get to believe what I want, and we'll take it to the polls.

I don't try to reconcile much. I feel like

something up on a computer and format it and spell check it or plagiarize it, and it looks really good, but it doesn't mean it's creative or important. I've urged my writing students to send as much money as they can to the Sierra Club but to print out pages. I believe in paper and I believe in graphite. Scratching and scritch on paper. Those are sacred sounds.

### **As a contemplative you're unique in that you have embraced modern technology. Your Facebook posts routinely get over 10,000 likes. I imagine many old-school writers would opt for anything but.**

I know, I was so surprised that I just complete-

ly fell in love with Twitter and Facebook. To be honest, I just think it's partly my old left-wing, aging-hippie sensibilities. I love the populism of it. There are so few publishing houses that are publishing creative or really bold writing. So to self-publish is really what I would do if I were a young writer. It's great to have Facebook and have a hundred thousand people read it—it's a dream come true. Because I do okay in my regular writing life, I don't need to make money doing it.

And so I love the populism, I love the direct experience of communicating with readers and hearing back from them. Same with Twitter. I've always sort of pooh-poohed it and thought of it derisively. I thought it was taking people away from their "real writing," but it's really helped me as a writer. You have to write really short.

### How did motherhood affect you and your work?

Motherhood was challenging because I didn't have any money and was desperately broke when I had my son. It's hard to make a living as a writer. As a single parent, you get more serious about your time, because there's so little that's "yours" anymore. If I had eight hours to write before Sam, that's about five hours of real writing time. Then all of a sudden I only have four, which gives only about two-and-a-half hours of real writing time from when you sit down. With all the distractions and leaping up and remembering you have to cancel your dentist appointment or this or that.

One effect of being a parent is that you become more fearful, scared that something will happen to your child, that the world and human life will be too hard. In early childhood and elementary school it's relatively easy, but then you know what they're in for—that their hearts are going to be broken repeatedly, that they're going to fail, that they're going to grapple with the human condition and the constant striving and their mortality. It gave me more life skills in terms of letting go and surrendering a lot of the results and developing patience. It did make me stricter with my time, as I said, because until Sam was 18 and moved out, half of my life was about him. It's like having a little industry. So I was a full-time writer and the breadwinner running the house, keeping his health, and the secretary keeping his artistic and athletic and social life in place. It's hard to capture in words, but it changed me profoundly, as my life was infinitely enriched by being both a parent and a grandparent, but it was infinitely harder in many ways.

### For artists to succeed financially, the



### base rate averages are dreadful. How do you advise aspiring artists?

To do what I did my whole life, which was to have another job to make a living. Until *Bird by Bird*, my sixth book, came out, I had other jobs. After *Operating Instructions*, my fifth book, I had a book review column at *Mademoiselle* that did pay some of the bills, but before that I'd always taught tennis and cleaned house.

It's not a made-for-TV movie. It's real life. Very few artists and writers, even many of the great ones, make a living at it. If you have that inclination, if it's in your heart to be a writer or an artist, you're going to need a way to support your habit. If you don't honor that, you're going to have a horrible life with regret and pain. You're going to kick yourself because you had this gift inside of you that you never found the sufficient discipline or time to honor.

That's the value of the '50s—it was discipline and structure and sacrifice, and you don't hear those words anymore because they seem counterintuitive to the creative process, but it's called Real Life 101. You have a 40-hour-a-week job, then I say you find one or two hours a day, five days a week, where you can get the writing done.

People always say, "I don't have any time." But then you find out they go to the gym five days a week. Well, can you give me two of those days? They say, "Then I don't feel good

about myself." I understand that people want to be thin, but if that's the choice and the priority, then you might wake up at 80 with a broken heart because you never got to work on your writing. You can do it at night when the kids go to bed. Every single night from 9:00 to 10:00. That'll buy you about 15 minutes of real writing time, but at the end you've got a book written. If you can't find the time, no one can help you.

### Apparently, your writing is flowing well right now. What is happening?

One of the reasons I'm so busy this week is I have a set of revisions due for a book, another collection of essays. But I wouldn't say it's going really well because that would be discouraging to other writers, or to the younger writers. It's going; I'm working hard. I wouldn't use the word *flow* in my case. It's always hard going; I'm never in the mood. I never have any self-esteem and always feel the well is left dry. It's always hard work for me. My work sells really well lately, and that's been a great blessing, but it's still always like pulling teeth. I feel these stories inside of me that want out are important to tell and might be helpful to people, particularly creative or spiritual types or mothers or fathers and grandparents and aunts and uncles—i.e., people deeply in the lives of children.

### **You're known for your brave, unrelenting candor, but you do hold back, right?**

I'm never going to tell my family secrets, I'm never going to betray the confidence of my son or my brothers or my cousins. I know intimate stuff about the people I'm closest with because that's the level at which we're operating; we seek intimacy. I have a handful of closest friends, but I'm never going to put that on paper because that's not for me to tell. I don't tell my private stuff to the public. I tell stuff that I know is universal.

### **What does the phrase "dark night of the soul" mean to you?**

In *Help, Thanks, Wow* I wrote about that a lot because I guess at that point of not having any more answers or having any big plans or solutions or great ideas, that's when things got really teachable and available in my life—to a place I call the movement of grace. The "dark night of the soul" is where almost everything profound in literary and spiritual wisdom comes from. The most important stuff doesn't come from people in good moods; it comes from struggle. From being pressed really hard and from being way outside your comfort zone and forced to turn deeply within to something you may never have had the courage to try before—i.e., not trying one of your good ideas but instead surrendering the reins. When somebody says they are in that dark night, I say, "Hallelujah—finally!" Probably up until then they were pasting and mending and stapling things together trying to work things along. Now they have the possibility of something true and brand-new, new life, new direction—new stamina enters the scene.

### **What is the effect of literary success, particularly on your ego?**

I can say that all artists, writers, painters, musicians are in the same boat that I'm in, that we have terrible self-esteem. We also just have this raging narcissism and huge wounded egos. I'm not sure it's different from the noncreative type; it's the human condition. Writers might think that when they get published, all their problems will be solved, but they better buckle up because a whole new kind of problem is just beginning. Their ego is going to take an infinitely worse beating from being published than from not being published. It can be devastating unless you stay very spiritually fit.

My ego sometimes runs absolutely unchecked but then usually at that point, I step on a cosmic banana peel and land on my butt. I'm very conscious of hubris. As a spiritual woman, as a Christian, and as a religious woman, I spend a lot of time in prayer asking

God, working with God, to diminish my ego because I know there is going to be very little happiness in anything my ego seeks. I've gotten almost everything that the ego of a writer could want. It doesn't fill you up. It's not nurturing, it doesn't enliven you. It usually works like a couple lines of cocaine for a very limited amount of time but then you just want and desperately need more. It's a loser's paradise.

The writing fills you, the creation fills you, the sharing with other writers helps you, the working with other writers, helping them with their material, mentoring old and very young and very lost teenagers will fill you in a way publication never can and never would, despite the promises. The culture is so full of lies that if you achieve this and then that, that you're going to feel satisfied with the sense of joy that you're welcomed on this earth. It's just a lie. Another lie of the culture is to try to get you to keep striving for evermore and never be satisfied.

I turned 60 two weeks ago, and know a little bit more what is true now and what will make me feel joy, and it won't be a good review. That may work for several hours, and then I need another good review. Being a writer now is mostly living with the fact that you'll get very few reviews, as very few publications still review books. The truth, spiritually, and the work are going to be the truth for you, that as a published writer or as a want-to-be published writer, it comes from within. It comes from your heart spirit or your soul. It's going to nurture and oxygenate you. If it comes from your ego, you're just doomed. You're going to be infinitely crazier after publication than you already were.

### **Is it the same with romance?**

It's the same sort of lie that people think if they get a book published or they lose 20 pounds or if they find the right mate, that it will fill them up—it will fill the God-shaped hole inside of them. Finding a relationship is just like getting published. It's like a whole new set of extreme challenges. There are very few good marriages. It's like this fantasy the world has to offer.

I feel that all that stuff on the outside promises so much when people fall in love—it's like getting a great review—but it usually lasts a short amount of time and then real life rears its head. Real life wants real stuff. It's not satiated by the fantasy. I feel like it would be wonderful to find a soulmate, but I don't have any illusions that it would fill me up or be the solution to any of my problems. I'm writing right now, single, as well as I've ever written in my life. So I don't know what the correlation is. I know many who are in relationships, but their work

is either going very badly or they get published and don't get reviews or don't sell any books. I just think that it doesn't come from the outside world; it doesn't come from outside ourselves. That's why I think all of the writing and being of service to other writers and to other readers is the only thing that can fill us up.

### **What is at the core of the creative soul of Anne Lamott?**

The core of my creative soul is this calling, almost like a calling to the priesthood, of being part of the literary community in which I was saved, in which I found salvation as a young child and as a feminist and as a writer and as a mother, as a member of the earth and the human community. My calling is to create and re-create and to continue the process that others before me began.

It's like a relay race, and I was given the baton, and I was given the gift of a lot of encouragement from my father, certain teachers, and a lot of different writers, such as Rumi and Virginia Woolf. I am reading great books on writing by Brenda Euland and Stephen King. I was given permission and been encouraged to run with it; I've run with it. At the core of my creative soul is this belief that there is truth and that it will set us free. And that we have a debt of honor to give back what was so freely given to us, which is this truth and the exhilaration of art and the miracle that we have found in other people's love and artistic expression. To honor the miracles, and the life, and the resurrection that we've personally experienced as the result of other people's creative greatness and effort. My life without creativity is not any kind of life at all.

### **Any final words for *Common Ground* readers, many of whom have tracked you for decades, and others who discover you now?**

I deeply believe that creativity can help us save the world, but in the meta sense of finding outside-the-box solutions to environmental catastrophe, and by giving voice to the poor and to angry, lost teenagers and to gang members and to the marginalized elderly and poverty-stricken—all of whom have been silenced. Because adding their voices and energy to the mix will greatly enrich all our lives, our creative gene pool, and our chance of survival. And also our inside lives. Our individual expression of spirit and divinity, because music, poetry, art, dance take us to places within that nothing else can reach. Each of us gets to shoot the moon, creatively, to make it part of our devotion. Creativity *is* life and begets life and, ultimately, oneness and joy. 🐾